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New Information About Disposing of Medical Sharps

The Coalition for Safe Community Needle Disposal, comprised of medical, government and waste association and private sector companies, is working with the Environmental Protection Agency to evaluate and promote alternative disposal methods for used needles and other medical sharps.

Improper management of discarded needles and other sharps can pose a health risk to the public and waste workers. For example, discarded needles may expose waste workers to potential needle stick injuries and potential infection when containers break open inside garbage trucks or needles are mistakenly sent to recycling facilities. Janitors and housekeepers also risk injury if loose sharps poke through plastic garbage bags. Used needles can transmit serious diseases, such as HIV and hepatitis.

The Coalition has identified several types of safe disposal programs for self-injectors. Instead of placing sharps in the trash, self-injectors are encouraged to use any of these alternative disposal methods:

- **Drop Box or Supervised Collection Sites**

Sharps users can take their own sharps containers filled with used needles to appropriate collections sites: doctors' offices, hospitals, pharmacies, health departments, or fire stations. Services are free or have a nominal fee. Check with your pharmacist or other health care provider for availability in your area.

- **Mail-back Programs**

Sharps users place their used sharps in special containers and return the container by mail to a collection site for proper disposal. This service usually requires a fee. Fees vary, depending on the size of the container. Check with your health care provider, pharmacist, yellow pages, or search the Internet using keywords “sharps mail back.”

- **Syringe Exchange Programs (SEP)**

Sharps users can safely exchange used needles for new needles. Contact the North American Syringe Exchange Network at 253-272-4857 or online at www.nasen.org.

- **At-home Needle Destruction Devices**

Several manufacturers offer products that allow you to destroy used needles at home. These devices sever, burn, or melt the needle, rendering it safe for disposal. Check with your pharmacist or search the internet using keywords “sharps disposal devices.” The prices of these devices vary according to product type and manufacturer.

For More Information:

- Call your local solid waste department or public health department to determine the correct disposal method for your area.
- Ask your health care provider or local pharmacist if they offer disposal, or if they know of safe disposal programs in the area.
- Contact the Coalition for Safe Community Needle Disposal at 1-800-643-1643 Ask about the availability of safe disposal programs in your area or for information on setting up a community disposal program. Visit www.epa.gov/epaoswer/other/medical. This website also offers a list of all state health and solid waste/sanitation department contacts.